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Conflict and the “Slave Community”: Violence among Slaves in Upcountry South Carolina

By JEFF FORRET

IN 1826 WILLIAM HAMILTON, A SLAVEHOLDER IN PENDLETON DISTRICT, South Carolina, reported to the authorities “that his Negro Fellow Dave was violently Beat & abused.” He identified Dave’s attackers as “two Negro Fellows by the Name of Ben & Aleck Belonging to John Adams & a Negro Boy Named Allen belonging to Arch^d Keaton.” In another incident, two Spartanburg District slaves, Bob and Harry, the property of Agnes Barnet, “did on the plantation of the Widdow Mary Lewis in a tumultuous manner make an affray with the Slaves of John S. Rowland” in 1835. That same year the congregation of Big Creek Baptist Church in Anderson District learned that “Mr. Owens ben had acted disorderly in striking his fellowservant.” Only three years earlier, the same church had dismissed “Brother Ceasor . . . fornocking down his fellow servent with an Ax.” All these episodes occurred within a decade of one another in the remote northwestern corner of upcountry South Carolina. Combined with dozens of similar cases from the same region, they together speak to the complex role violence played among slaves, as both a creative and a destructive force in the quarters. An analysis of violence among slaves reveals the values and unstated rules that governed their social world and contributes to the continuing effort to refine the “slave community” paradigm.¹

¹ Pendleton District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers (South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia; hereinafter cited as SCDAH), microfilm reel C2916, case 24; Spartanburg District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDAH, microfilm reel C2920, case 11; entries for September 5, 1835, and May 1, 1832, Minutes of Big Creek Baptist Church, Williamston, South Carolina [1801–1836] (South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia), microfilm reel R5. For their assistance, I am indebted to Peter Kolchin, Dylan Penningroth, Brenda Stevenson, Larry McDonnell, Kathy Hilliard, and the anonymous readers for the *Journal of Southern History*. My gratitude extends as well to everyone who attended the Houston Area Southern Historians (HASH) meeting in January 2007 and kindly offered comments and direction on an earlier

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Despite the relative lack of academic fanfare it received when first published in 1972, John W. Blassingame's *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* quickly emerged as one of the classic works in the historiography of American slavery. *The Slave Community* effectively refuted the 1959 argument of Stanley M. Elkins, who, drawing on an analogy to Nazi concentration camps, held that the closed system of slavery in the American South produced a distinctive slave personality, the docile and childlike Sambo. Blassingame argued that the Sambo stereotype was not the dominant personality type among slaves; rather, it marked merely one in an entire "range of personality types." Moreover, Blassingame demonstrated that Sambo was a mask, a role that slaves performed for masters' edification, and that slaves could *play* Sambo without *being* Sambo. The submissive Sambo, Blassingame clarified, proved real, but Sambo-like behavior represented a ritual expression of deference and did not signal any genuine psychic injury inflicted by the institution of slavery. For slaves, acting like Sambo served as a defense mechanism, allowing them to cope with the oppression of bondage.²

In rejecting Elkins's Sambo thesis, *The Slave Community* not only provided a necessary corrective but also contributed to a fundamental reorientation in slave studies. Blassingame helped initiate decades of sophisticated scholarship that looked at slavery from the perspective of the bondpeople themselves. Increasingly, historians recognized slaves not as passive objects of white treatment but as active agents shaping their own lives. These scholars emphasized the ways in which slaves' close familial networks, religious beliefs and gatherings, and rich culture insulated those in bondage from the brutal excesses of enslavement.

version of this article. I presented a small portion of this work as "Inside the Internal Economy: Slaves, Property, and Violence in the Antebellum South," at the twenty-ninth annual meeting of the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic (SHEAR) in Worcester, Massachusetts, July 2007; and another as "Slave Men, the Family, and Violence in the Antebellum South," at the 101st annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians in New York City, March 2008. The Institute for Southern Studies provided a generous travel grant that permitted research at the South Carolina Department of Archives and History in Columbia, where Steve Tuttle proved immensely helpful.

² Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (3rd ed.; Chicago, 1976); John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (rev. ed.; New York, 1979), 190, 226, 238, 293, 305, 312–13, 320–21 (quotation on both 238 and 320). On *The Slave Community*'s reception by historians, see Mary Frances Berry, "The Slave Community: A Review of Reviews," in Al-Tony Gilmore, ed., *Revisiting Blassingame's The Slave Community: The Scholars Respond* (Westport, Conn., 1978), 3, 14–15. For more on Sambo, see also Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Mask of Obedience: Male Slave Psychology in the Old South," *American Historical Review*, 93 (December 1988), 1228–52, esp. 1239–40, 1242, 1245, 1249.

ment and helped them resist dehumanization.³ But as Peter Kolchin has observed, the resulting portrait of “antebellum slavery present[ed] an exaggerated picture of the strength and cohesion of the slave community.” The scholarship’s stress on the positive steps slaves took to cope with bondage and its “celebratory tone” often overlooked the harsh realities of bondage, forging what he described as the myth “of the utopian slave community.” Taking to heart Kolchin’s caution against such glorification, several historians, including most recently Brenda E. Stevenson, Christopher Morris, Anthony E. Kaye, and Dylan C. Penningroth, have challenged overly romantic interpretations of a harmonious and idyllic slave community virtually devoid of conflict. A look at violence among slaves in upcountry South Carolina adds to this ongoing scholarship designed to complicate our understanding of the slave community.⁴

³ In addition to Blassingame’s *Slave Community*, some of the most significant works are Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974); Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York, 1976); Leslie Howard Owens, *This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South* (New York, 1976); Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1978); and Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York, 1987). For a recent critique of the persistence of “agency” in slave studies, see Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History*, 37 (Fall 2003), 113–24.

⁴ Peter Kolchin, “Reevaluating the Antebellum Slave Community: A Comparative Perspective,” *Journal of American History*, 70 (December 1983), 579–601 (quotations on 581). See also Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619–1877* (New York, 1993), 148–55. Even in the 1970s, a small number of historians raised questions about the precise meaning of “the slave community.” See, for example, George P. Rawick, “Some Notes on a Social Analysis of Slavery: A Critique and Assessment of *The Slave Community*,” in Gilmore, ed., *Revisiting Blassingame’s The Slave Community*, 24; and Leslie Howard Owens, “Blacks in *The Slave Community*,” *ibid.*, 62. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 622–37, was unique in considering the role of violence among slaves. A number of historians subsequently challenged the overstated emphasis on communal solidarity among slaves. Kolchin, “Reevaluating the Antebellum Slave Community,” 584, 588; Jean Butenhoff Lee, “The Problem of Slave Community in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 43 (July 1986), 333–61, esp. 334, 338, 340, 343, 348, 350, 361; and Nell Irvin Painter, *Southern History Across the Color Line* (Chapel Hill, 2002), 30, have identified factors that posed obstacles to the construction of a viable slave community. Other scholars have identified various cleavages among the bondpeople themselves that highlighted the fragility of the slave community. See, for example, C. W. Harper, “House Servants and Field Hands: Fragmentation in the Antebellum Slave Community,” *North Carolina Historical Review*, 55 (January 1978), 42–59; Harper, “Black Aristocrats: Domestic Servants on the Antebellum Plantation,” *Phylon*, 46 (No. 2, 1985), 123–35; Michael P. Johnson, “Runaway Slaves and the Slave Communities in South Carolina, 1799 to 1830,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 38 (July 1981), 418–41; Johnson, “Work, Culture, and the Slave Community: Slave Occupations in the Cotton Belt in 1860,” *Labor History*, 27 (Summer 1986), 325–55; William L. Van Deburg, *The Slave Drivers: Black Agricultural Labor Supervisors in the Antebellum South* (Westport, Conn., 1979); Brenda Stevenson, “Distress and Discord in Virginia Slave Families, 1830–1860,” in Carol Bleser, ed., *In Joy and in Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, 1830–1900* (New York, 1991), 103–24; Stevenson, “Gender Convention, Ideals, and Identity among Antebellum Virginia Slave Women,” in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, eds.,

Historians have long established that violence permeated nineteenth-century southern society. Southern gentlemen engaged in duels, lower-class whites fought rough-and-tumble brawls and eye-gouging matches, and masters wielded the whip to discipline their slaves.⁵ But whites held no monopoly on the exercise of violence in the Old South. Slaves engaged in violent, aggressive behavior as well, although historians have granted scant attention to the physical confrontations endemic to the slave quarters.⁶ No comprehensive investigation of the violence that erupted among slaves exists to parallel the thorough examinations of violence committed by southern whites. But as Dylan Penningroth pointedly observes, "There is no reason to think that the black community in the 1800s was any more harmonious than the white community." To be sure, slaves did love each other, cooperate, and combat oppression, but they also sometimes lashed out at their friends and family and beat or killed one another. Indeed, violent

More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas (Bloomington, 1996), 173–74; Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York, 1996); Christopher Morris, "Within the Slave Cabin: Violence in Mississippi Slave Families," in Christine Daniels and Michael V. Kennedy, eds., *Over the Threshold: Intimate Violence in Early America* (New York, 1999), 268–85; Anthony E. Kaye, "Neighbourhoods and Solidarity in the Natchez District of Mississippi: Rethinking the Antebellum Slave Community," *Slavery and Abolition*, 23 (April 2002), 1–24; Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, 2003); and Emily West, "Tensions, Tempers, and Temptations: Marital Discord Among Slaves in Antebellum South Carolina," *American Nineteenth Century History*, 5 (Summer 2004), 1–18. The pervasiveness of the slave community paradigm is evident in the titles of many important works on slavery, including George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, Conn., 1972); Thomas L. Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community, 1831–1865* (New York, 1978); Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana, 1984); and Lorena S. Walsh, *From Calabar to Carter's Grove: The History of a Virginia Slave Community* (Charlottesville, 1997).

⁵ On antebellum southern violence see W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (1941; reprint, New York, 1991); John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South, 1800–1861* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956); Dickson D. Bruce Jr., *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South* (Austin, 1979); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982); Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th-Century American South* (New York, 1984); Elliott J. Gorn, "'Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch': The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry," *American Historical Review*, 90 (February 1985), 18–43; Grady McWhiney, *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South* (Tuscaloosa, 1988); Kenneth S. Greenberg, "The Nose, the Lie, and the Duel in the Antebellum South," *American Historical Review*, 95 (February 1990), 57–74; Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 1992); Laura F. Edwards, "Law, Domestic Violence, and the Limits of Patriarchal Authority in the Antebellum South," *Journal of Southern History*, 65 (November 1999), 733–70; Edward E. Baptist, "'My Mind Is to Drown You and Leave You Behind': 'Omie Wise,' Intimate Violence, and Masculinity," in Daniels and Kennedy, eds., *Over the Threshold*, 94–110; and Loren Schwenger, "Slavery and Southern Violence: County Court Petitions and the South's Peculiar Institution," *Journal of Negro History*, 85 (Winter–Spring 2000), 33–35.

⁶ Painter, *Southern History Across the Color Line*, 6. The one exception concerns the subject of domestic abuse. For scholarly works on the topic, see note 30 below.

confrontations among slaves provide the most overt evidence that divisions and disputes wracked those in bondage. An examination of these encounters promises to recover “the tragedy of slavery” missing from much of the post-*Slave Community* scholarship.⁷

South Carolina slaves formally charged with violent crimes appeared before the state’s Courts of Magistrates and Freeholders.⁸ Trial papers survive from fourteen antebellum South Carolina districts, with the bulk of the evidence on slave-on-slave violence found in the four upcountry districts of Anderson (including the former district of Pendleton), Laurens, Pickens, and Spartanburg. These records offer an avenue through which to capture the emotional complexity of slave life. An examination of violent conflicts among bondpeople opens a window into slave culture, revealing slaves’ conceptions of property, family, and honor as they negotiated their interpersonal relationships. The violent episodes that the records of the Courts of Magistrates and Freeholders uncover contribute to the scholarly trend away from the sanitized slave community of old and toward a more realistic portrayal of life in the slave quarters.

The upcountry districts of Anderson, Laurens, Pickens, and Spartanburg were not typical of South Carolina as a whole. Whereas South Carolina had long maintained a black majority statewide, whites outnumbered blacks substantially in each of the four districts except Laurens, where slaves composed a slight majority of the population by 1850. As Table 1 shows, the slave population increased in each district throughout the antebellum era, and the percentage of slaves in the overall population rose steadily everywhere except Pickens District. The percentage of slaves in the total population remained roughly constant in Pickens, while Laurens experienced the most pronounced demographic shift toward an increasingly enslaved population. Nevertheless, the four districts under study collectively accounted for only

⁷ Penningroth, *Claims of Kinfolk*, 8 (first quotation), 99–100; Laurence Shore, “The Poverty of Tragedy in Historical Writing on Southern Slavery,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 85 (Spring 1986), 147–64, esp. 148, 160, 164 (second quotation). See also Orlando Patterson, “Whatever Happened to the Horrors of Slavery?” (transcript of presentation at the Rice Center for Cultural Studies, Moral Sensibilities in Cultural and Historical Context, Session No. 11, January 19, 1989; photocopy in the possession of the author).

⁸ On the history and workings of the South Carolina Courts of Magistrates and Freeholders, see Terry W. Lipscomb and Theresa Jacobs, “The Magistrates and Freeholders Court,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 77 (January 1976), 62–65; William C. Henderson, “The Slave Court System in Spartanburg County,” *Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association* (1976), 31–37; Robert Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740–1790* (Ithaca, 1998), 73–77, 90; and W. J. Megginson, *African American Life in South Carolina’s Upper Piedmont, 1780–1900* (Columbia, S.C., 2006), chap. 5.

TABLE 1
SLAVE POPULATION AND SLAVES AS PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL POPULATION

	1830	1840	1850	1860
Anderson	4,427 (26%)	5,683 (31%)	7,514 (35%)	8,425 (37%)
Laurens	7,243 (36%)	8,911 (41%)	11,953 (51%)	13,200 (55%)
Pickens	2,866 (20%)	2,715 (19%)	3,679 (22%)	4,195 (21%)
Spartanburg	4,927 (23%)	5,687 (24%)	8,039 (30%)	8,240 (31%)
Total	19,463 (27%)	22,996 (29%)	31,185 (35%)	34,060 (37%)
Statewide	315,401 (54%)	327,038 (55%)	384,984 (58%)	402,406 (57%)

SOURCES: U.S. Census Office, *Abstract of the Returns of the Fifth Census, Showing the Number of Free People, the Number of Slaves, the Federal or Representative Number; and the Aggregate of Each County of Each State of the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1832), 21; U.S. Census Office, *Compendium of the Enumeration of the Inhabitants and Statistics of the United States . . . from the Returns of the Sixth Census . . .* (Washington, D.C., 1841), 46; U.S. Census Office, *Sixth Census or Enumeration of the Inhabitants of the United States, as Corrected at the Department of State, in 1840* (Washington, D.C., 1841), 229–30; U.S. Census Office, *The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850. Embracing a Statistical View of Each of the States . . .* (Washington, D.C., 1853), 338–39; U.S. Census Office, *Population of the United States in 1860: Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington, D.C., 1864), 452.

about 6 to 8 percent of South Carolina's overall slave population throughout the antebellum period. If slaveholding was not as widespread in the upcountry as it was elsewhere in South Carolina, upcountry masters also tended to own fewer slaves than their Lowcountry counterparts. Table 2 illustrates that, Laurens District excepted, a majority of slaveholders in the area under study owned five or fewer slaves, approximately 75 percent held fewer than ten, and more than 90 percent fewer than twenty. Only seven masters in the four districts combined owned more than one hundred slaves in 1860, with five of those seven residing in Laurens District. Altogether, the average slaveholder in Anderson, Pickens, and Spartanburg Districts held approximately eight slaves, little more than half the state average. Only Laurens District, with its average holding of 12.1, came close to approximating the state average in 1860 of 15.1 slaves per master. Upcountry farms were generally modest in size. Anderson, Pickens, and Spartanburg Districts contained roughly equal percentages of farms that were 20–49 acres, 50–99 acres, and 100–499 acres. Farms in Laurens District trended larger, with 62 percent of plantations between 100 and 499 acres. Few plantations of 500 or more acres could be found anywhere in the upcountry.⁹

Agriculturally, Laurens District, located at the margins of the cotton belt, differed from the other three upcountry districts under study. Laurens marked the only substantial cotton producer of the four, ranking fourth in the state in 1840, seventh in 1850, and eleventh in 1860. In Spartanburg, by contrast, more than half the farmers who grew cotton produced only one bale. Cotton production, in other words, did not dominate the region's economy. Instead, upcountry districts counted among the state's leading producers of grains such as wheat, Indian corn, oats, and rye. Laurens led the state in barley production in 1850, and Anderson, Pickens, and Spartanburg were among the few districts in South Carolina to produce flax. All four districts ranked in the top six in production of potatoes in 1850. The little tobacco grown in South Carolina took root in the upcountry as well.¹⁰ Manufacturing complemented the diversified agriculture. Anderson District ranked

⁹ U.S. Census Office, *Agriculture of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington, D.C., 1864), 214.

¹⁰ U.S. Census Office, *Compendium of the Enumeration of the Inhabitants and Statistics of the United States . . . from the Returns of the Sixth Census . . .* (Washington, D.C., 1841), 191–92; U.S. Census Office, *The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850. Embracing a Statistical View of Each of the States . . .* (Washington, D.C., 1853), 346–47; U.S. Census Office, *Agriculture of the United States in 1860*, p. 129; Philip N. Racine, ed., *Piedmont Farmer: The Journals of David Golightly Harris, 1855–1870* (Knoxville, 1990), 2.

TABLE 2
SLAVES AND SLAVEHOLDERS, 1860

# Slaves	# Slaveholders			
	Anderson	Laurens	Pickens	Spartanburg
1	180	144	109	199
2	144	100	58	110
3	92	80	38	94
4	101	68	52	65
5	82	61	34	62
% 5 or fewer	54%	41%	55%	53%
6	64	56	37	45
7	71	46	25	54
8	58	46	25	45
9	37	53	25	36
% 9 or fewer	75%	60%	76%	71%
10–19	189	266	88	198
% less than 20	92%	84%	93%	90%
100 or more	0	5	0	2
# Slaveholders	1,103	1,093	529	1,007
# Slaves	8,425	13,200	4,195	8,240
Slaves/master	7.6	12.1	7.9	8.2

SOURCE: U.S. Census Office, *Agriculture of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington, D.C., 1864), 237.

second in the state in homemade manufactures in both 1840 and 1850, and Spartanburg, Pickens, and Laurens each placed in the top six in that same category in one or both of those two censuses. Anderson, Spartanburg, and Laurens, along with upcountry neighbor Greenville District, accounted for just over half of the establishments in the entire state manufacturing flour and meal.¹¹ The upcountry towns of Greenville and Spartanburg were the only urban areas in the region to exceed one thousand residents by 1850.¹² Even in an upcountry characterized by a white majority, small holdings, and a diversified

¹¹ U.S. Census Office, *Compendium of the Enumeration of the Inhabitants and Statistics of the United States . . . from the Returns of the Sixth Census*, 193; U.S. Census Office, *Seventh Census of the United States: 1850*, p. 347; U.S. Census Office, *Manufactures of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington, D.C., 1865), 552–57.

¹² U.S. Census Office, *Seventh Census of the United States: 1850*, p. 339.

economy, slaves would find occasion to engage in violent confrontations with fellow bondpeople.

The vast majority of these violent episodes among slaves went unrecorded. If slaves belonging to the same master attacked one another, that master rarely had any legal recourse or justification for hauling the slave aggressor to court. Slaves, however, sometimes fought with bondpeople from nearby plantations. Masters might ignore such conflicts if any wounds inflicted were minor, and if they intervened at all, owners of the participants often handled such matters privately, without resorting to the court system. For trivial offenses, only the most litigious of masters utilized the courts for slave discipline. When slaves held by different masters severely injured, maimed, or murdered one another, though, slaveholders often pursued redress through formal legal channels, leaving a paper trail for scholars to follow. Hence, the Courts of Magistrates and Freeholders records privilege the sensational over the mundane, as well as the violent conflicts that crossed plantation boundaries over those occurring within the confines of a single landholding. Documented cases are also partial to the violence perpetrated by slave men rather than by slave women, even though upcountry female slaves also engaged in violent quarrels. Annie Coley recalled one instance when “some niggah womens” received “a lick or two with a whip” for “fightin in de cotton fiel’,” while former Spartanburg District slave Emanuel Elmore remembered another “time a lot of the negroes in the quarter got drunk and ma got to fighting all of them.”¹³ Like most episodes of female slave violence, these produced no deaths or serious injuries and therefore fail to appear in court records. Because most violent confrontations between slaves never became a matter of public record, the Courts of Magistrates and Freeholders trial papers drastically underreport the total number of incidents. Indeed, upcountry slaves were far more likely to find themselves in court for assaulting not fellow bondpeople but rather neighborhood whites. Slave codes across the South proved more interested in prosecuting bondpeople for transgressions committed against whites (and their property) than against others in bondage. Hence, in Laurens District, slaves were six times more likely to appear in court for inflicting violence on a white victim than on another black. Virtually all slaves who physically assaulted a white person faced legal action,

¹³ George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*. Supplement, Series 1, Vol. 7: *Mississippi Narratives*, Pt. 2 (Westport, Conn., 1977), 441 (first through third quotations); Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*. Vol. 2: *South Carolina Narratives*, Pt. 2 (Westport, Conn., 1972), 9 (fourth quotation).

compared with only a small fraction who attacked another slave. Given the nature of the cases that appeared before the Courts of Magistrates and Freeholders, then, the sheer numbers hardly prove that slaves did, in fact, assault whites more frequently than other bondpeople.¹⁴

Courts of Magistrates and Freeholders records document no fewer than seventy-five incidents of violence among slaves in antebellum South Carolina serious enough to warrant litigation, with some examples occurring as early as 1808 but most from the 1820s onward. These cases make up but a small fraction of all slave crimes, ranging from 3 to 8 percent in Laurens, Spartanburg, Anderson, and Pickens Districts. At least 18 of 302 cases in Spartanburg District (6 percent) and 31 of 429 cases in Anderson District (7 percent) involved slaves who had inflicted violence on a counterpart in bondage. These percentages were somewhat higher elsewhere in South Carolina, up to 14 percent in Clarendon District. But the Clarendon figure is based on a total of only seven cases of slave crime. Among districts with a significant number of slave criminal cases, Kershaw District had the highest rate of slave-on-slave violence, at 12 percent. At the other extreme, none of the thirty-four cases in Greenville District recorded instances of violence among slaves. The seventy-five incidents of slave-on-slave violence in the South Carolina upcountry, though significant, seem paltry compared with the prevalence of cases involving exclusively whites. The Court of General Sessions indexes for Laurens and Spartanburg Districts alone reveal more than 1,800 cases of whites accused of assault and battery, riot, affray, or murder of other whites between 1800 and the end of the Civil War. Per capita, the number of violent episodes among white participants dwarfed that among slaves. Most slaves who stood before the Courts of Magistrates and Freeholders instead appeared charged with theft, retailing liquor, or using insulting language to a white person, among a plethora of other offenses.¹⁵

Yet violent conflicts did erupt among slaves in the South Carolina

¹⁴ Investigating colonial South Carolina, Robert Ollwell found that thirty South Carolina slaves were executed for violent crimes between 1750 and 1759, but only six of these crimes, or 20 percent of the total, were committed against other bondpeople. Ollwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects*, 79. Given the racialized social order of the South, it makes perfect sense that slaves were more likely to be put to death if they committed a violent crime against a white person than against a black. This article, however, is not limited by the punishments meted out by the court's verdict.

¹⁵ Records of both the Courts of Magistrates and Freeholders and the Court of General Sessions are in the SCDAH. By contrast, Herbert S. Klein notes, "Two-thirds of the victims of crimes in the city of Rio de Janeiro between 1810 and 1821 were slaves assaulted by their fellow slaves." See Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York, 1986), 214.

upcountry. Why? Some disputes originated in disagreements over property. The scholarship on the informal slave economy has mushroomed in recent decades. Most of this literature has focused on the Lowcountry, where the widespread use of the task system afforded many bondpeople sufficient hours to tend their own garden plots or raise livestock. As Southern Claims Commission records demonstrate, many Lowcountry slaves accumulated impressive amounts of property.¹⁶ Even in the upcountry, where the task system was not as frequently employed and where limited available land precluded some masters from supplying bondpeople with their own provision grounds, slaves engaged in independent production for market, earned an income, and purchased consumer goods. Masters increasingly uncomfortable with slaves' fiscal freedom responded by imposing restrictions designed to curtail slaves' autonomous economic behavior, but upcountry bondpeople nevertheless continued to amass property of their own.¹⁷ Lawrence T. McDonnell suspects that slave participation in market activities as producers and consumers fostered division in the slave quarters. He detects an incipient class division among slave "haves" and "have nots" in South Carolina. Those who were less economically successful resented those who had accumulated more or better consumer goods and thereby amplified their status in the quarters. Dylan Penningroth's research likewise confirms that disputes over property and property ownership undermined slaves' sense of community.¹⁸

¹⁶ Philip D. Morgan, "Work and Culture: The Task System and the World of Lowcountry Blacks, 1700 to 1880," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 39 (October 1982), 563–99; Morgan, "The Ownership of Property by Slaves in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century Low Country," *Journal of Southern History*, 49 (August 1983), 399–420.

¹⁷ John Campbell, "As 'A Kind of Freeman'? Slaves' Market-Related Activities in the South Carolina Upcountry, 1800–1860," in Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *The Slaves' Economy: Independent Production by Slaves in the Americas* (London, 1991), 131–69. On the Old South's internal economy outside the Lowcountry, see also Jeff Forret, "Slaves, Poor Whites, and the Underground Economy of the Rural Carolinas," *Journal of Southern History*, 70 (November 2004), 783–824; Larry E. Hudson Jr., "'All That Cash': Work and Status in the Slave Quarters," in Hudson, ed., *Working Toward Freedom: Slave Society and Domestic Economy in the American South* (Rochester, N.Y., 1994), 77–94; Lawrence T. McDonnell, "Money Knows No Master: Market Relations and the American Slave Community," in Winfred B. Moore Jr., Joseph F. Tripp, and Lyon G. Tyler Jr., eds., *Developing Dixie: Modernization in a Traditional Society* (Westport, Conn., 1988), 31–44; Joseph P. Reidy, "Obligation and Right: Patterns of Labor, Subsistence, and Exchange in the Cotton Belt of Georgia, 1790–1860," in Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (Charlottesville, 1993), 138–54; John T. Schlotterbeck, "The Internal Economy of Slavery in Rural Piedmont Virginia," in Berlin and Morgan, eds., *Slaves' Economy*, 170–81; and Loren Schweninger, "The Underside of Slavery: The Internal Economy, Self-Hire, and Quasi-Freedom in Virginia, 1780–1865," *Slavery and Abolition*, 12 (September 1991), 1–22.

¹⁸ McDonnell, "Money Knows No Master," 37–38 (quotations on 38); Penningroth, *Claims*

The erosion of community over property disputes sometimes manifested itself in violence. Many of these confrontations took place during slaves' time off, late on Saturdays, Sundays, or holidays. Ironically, violence often broke out on the Sabbath, at or near a church. As the holy attended services, the profane ran amok outside the church doors. Near Anderson District's Hopewell Church on a Sunday in June 1846, for instance, the slave Lossan was drunk. He "could not walk well" but was nevertheless "selling cakes." Bondman Toney also "had some ginger cakes with him that day," as enterprising slave hucksters routinely attempted to sell their wares to the churchgoing crowd. Worldly slaves not attending Sunday services frequently gambled nearby, and these contests had the potential to culminate in violence. In Spartanburg District "Will & Charles was Gamling and Bet money on cards on the sabbath." A fight broke out between them over the "50 cts down." Bondmen Martin and Jim "were playing for Pocket Book & cards" in 1857: "Jim won the pile & Martin kept the cards & Jim collard Martin," prompting a brawl that concluded with Jim's death. Another affray broke out among several slaves gaming near Anderson District's First Creek Meeting House in 1858. Possibly because Lemuel Hall's slave Berry lost his coat in a wager, Clement Green's bondmen Jink and Joseph seized the garment. A "scuffle" ensued in which Jink struck Berry "three licks." The "quarrel about a coat" earned Jink fifteen lashes and Joe twenty-five for "Riotous & Disorderly conduct." Slaves' brief taste of liberty, their ability to travel and pursue leisurely pastimes, and their relative lack of physical exhaustion on Sundays meant that the Sabbath more than any other day played host to violent contests among slaves.¹⁹

Most cases of violence rooted in property disputes revolved around the issue of theft.²⁰ Upcountry slaves appear to have stolen from one another fairly frequently. One traveler to the South Carolina Lowcoun-

of *Kinfolk*, 7, 46, 80, 109; Dylan C. Penningroth, "My People, My People: The Dynamics of Community in Southern Slavery," in Edward E. Baptist and Stephanie M. H. Camp, eds., *New Studies in the History of American Slavery* (Athens, Ga., 2006), 166–76.

¹⁹ Penningroth, "My People, My People," 172; Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDAH, microfilm reel C2917, case 185 (first through third quotations); Spartanburg District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDAH, microfilm reel C2921, case 135 (fourth and fifth quotations); *ibid.*, case 191 (sixth and seventh quotations); Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDAH, microfilm reel C2919, case 327 (eighth through eleventh quotations).

²⁰ Alex Lichtenstein, "'That Disposition to Theft, with Which They Have Been Branded': Moral Economy, Slave Management, and the Law," *Journal of Social History*, 21 (Spring 1988), 413–40, discusses slaves' stealing from their masters. Theft among slaves has received far less attention, although it is mentioned in Penningroth, "My People, My People," 171–72.

try “observed that many of the doors” to the slave huts “were fastened by a padlock and chain outside.” Bondpeople who failed to take such precautions, he remarked, “would find their things stolen,” for “honesty is not a virtue they have towards each other.” Certainly, most upcountry slaves in their cramped cabins also lacked any secret or safe repository for their possessions. Cash and commodities were therefore both at risk. In 1857 Anderson District master Leroy W. Mattison charged one of his slaves to safeguard “his pocket book containing some Thirty Dollars and some papers.” When the cash went missing, Mattison swore before the Court of Magistrates and Freeholders that William Armstrong’s “boy Thornton did take the money.” Thornton had been “playing cards” with six other slaves, perhaps betting stolen cash. One slave witness testified that “Thornton won no money that night” but admitted that the participants had “fought.” Court records do not indicate whether the missing money was at the center of the conflict. In an equally cryptic case from Anderson District, Aron Hall’s slave George “commenced a row” with James Stephenson’s Joe, cursing Joe and striking him with a stick. George said he “dont know any thing about the Hundred dollar Bill.” Had Joe accused George of theft? If so, a hundred dollars would have been an astronomical sum for a slave to possess, and as in the previous example, it may have belonged to the master. Regardless, as John Campbell has explained, slaveholders’ efforts to rein in bondpeople’s independent economic activities were making cash increasingly scarce among upcountry South Carolina slaves in the 1840s and 1850s. As a result, there would likely have been a concomitant escalation of temptation when slaves spied untended or irresponsibly guarded money.²¹

Bondpeople stole not only cash but also a whole range of commodities. In Spartanburg District Sam and George, slaves of John B. Cleveland, had a falling-out over a tool. “Sam accused [George] of taking his hammer,” and George took offense, smiting Sam fatal blows with an ax and “a pole on the side of his head.” After the slave Dick of Anderson District declared that John Burdine’s bondman Toney “had stolen more leather than his back could pay for,” Toney confronted Dick (en route to church at the time), “struck him & knocked him down and stomped him, severely hurting him verry much.” Toney also fought Joshua Smith’s slave Sy “near Chappell Church” for what

²¹ William Howard Russell, *My Diary North and South* (Boston, 1863), 147 (first through fourth quotations); Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDAB, microfilm reel C2919, case 312 (fifth through ninth quotations) and case 342 (tenth and eleventh quotations); Campbell, “As ‘A Kind of Freeman’?” 147–48, 153.

"Sy had said about him in regard to some stolen leather." In 1853 Pickens District mistress Sarah Burgess's bondman Wiley, "a man of coler, Did steele some Tobacco and half a dollar in mony . . . on the sabeth from Jesse a man of color the Property of Elizabeth Fields." Jesse and Wiley had been teammates in a "friendly" interracial game of marbles against whites James P. Jenkins and the son of Wiley's employer, G. W. Julien. Jenkins won ten cents from Jesse, who then suddenly whirled and identified Wiley as "the Negro that stole his tobacco." The two slaves quarreled, with Jesse telling Wiley that "he came there after his tobacco and if he could not get it he could whip him." True to his word, Jesse "struck the first lick." Each of the two slaves ultimately received more than three dozen lashes for "Fighting on the sabeth and gaming."²²

Slaves rallied in defense of their property against any incursions from enslaved outsiders. Three cases from Anderson District illustrate the point. In 1844 slaves Louisa, Austin, and Yancy "did assault beat & in a Riotous manner abuse Florilla a Slave the property of . . . J. W. Norris." The three instigators "had Lost some meat," so they plotted to "Lay out J. W. Norris Negroes on Sunday to make them confess about stealing the Bacon." Florilla was on her way to church when the aggrieved bondpeople accosted her and threatened to "kick her Durned Brains" out to elicit a confession. Similarly, when one witness saw Mary D. Anderson's slave John "leaving Mrs. Guitans premises just before day break with a bout ½ B[ushel] of corn in a Bage" in November 1855, the onlooker assumed it was "stolen property." Margaret Guitan's bondman Dan also spotted John, approached him, and "put his hand on the corn," informing John, "you are two fat this morning." John instructed Dan to "say nothing A bout it," as "it did not come from here." Dan was apparently not convinced that the corn came from elsewhere, for a fight broke out. John joined with Dave, another of Mary D. Anderson's slaves, to attack Dan "with a stick on the Arm and then the head." For his part, Dan managed to inflict some "wounds with an Ax" or stick, sending John away "with his head brused and Blody." In both of these instances, slaves relied on violence as a means of self-preservation. The theft of bacon or corn meant less

²² Spartanburg District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDAB, microfilm reel C2922, case 296; Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDAB, microfilm reel C2775, case 400; Folder 11, Pickens District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, 1829–1862, SCDAB. The trial papers show that George was found guilty of manslaughter, jailed for two months, and given three hundred total lashes distributed in weekly increments of fifty. Toney received fifty lashes. See also McDonnell, "Money Knows No Master," 37–38.

food in their own bellies, so slaves willingly fought to safeguard their provisions. Trespassers likely understood this; otherwise, John would not have emphasized that his bag of stolen corn “did not come from *here*.” He implicitly assumed that if the theft did not reduce Dan’s rations, Dan would look aside as John slipped off with the pilfered foodstuff.²³

Slaves also protected their masters’ property even when it had no immediate value to them. In 1854 William Duckworth’s Ned crept “in to the Black Smith Shop” of Tom N. Smith, “pilfering and as tho he wished to Steal some of his Iron until his negros run him out of the shop.” Five Smith slaves and one bondman of Mrs. Guitan ran off Ned, but not before Ned struck the slave “Bill 2 Blows with his fist,” sparking a melee. The slaves who entered the fray likely did so not simply out of allegiance to the master. Had the bondpeople not prevented the theft, they may have taken the blame as well as the punishment for the missing iron.²⁴

Slaves also engaged in violent confrontations over the repayment of debts they had contracted with one another. One Saturday night in 1844 at William Duckworth’s “negroe houses,” Micajah B. Williams’s slave Baylis asked “Lazarus Tranums boy Jake” for the money he owed him. Jake explained that he had paid Daniel Owens’s slave Lewis, but when Baylis approached Lewis in Duckworth’s kitchen, Lewis “denied having [been] paid the mony for Baylis.” A fight ensued between Baylis and Jake, which concluded when Jake threw a rock that struck the other slave on the forehead and “nearly killed” him. In a similar case eighteen years later, when William Duckworth’s bondman Jess approached a slave named Steve for “what he owed him,” Steve dismissed the demand, retorting that he would “pay when ready.” Jess “damned [him] and told him to keep it.” Enraged, Steve stabbed Jess in the side with a knife and smote him on the head with a rock. Also in Anderson District, slaves Amos and Andrew “fell out about a debt contracted by Andrews having purchased some bread from him.” These cases demonstrate just how mathematically savvy the slaves were. Assiduous custodians of their limited financial resources, slaves engaged in some very careful mental bookkeeping, closely monitoring

²³ Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDH, microfilm reel C2917, case 154 (first through fourth quotations); *ibid.*, microfilm reel C2918, case 289 (sixth through thirteenth quotations). On Florilla, see also McDonnell, “Money Knows No Master,” 37.

²⁴ Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDH, microfilm reel C2918, case 268.

if not necessarily their debts then at least their credits. They expected compensation for what they were owed.²⁵

Slaves sometimes resorted to violence when the informal economy failed to function according to their expectations. In September 1827 slave Charles threatened Robert Cobb's bondman Dick at a store in Pendleton District "because Dick would not draw him . . . whiskey." Charles assumed that Dick, perhaps left to tend the shop, would supply a fellow slave his alcohol. Denied, Charles later attacked him with a stick. In Spartanburg District, slaves knew that the white man Robert Martin was "in the habit of keeping Liquor for sale." In 1850 the bondman Larken "called for Liquor. Martin poured some out in a mug and set it on the counter and said there is your Liquor." Larken paid for the alcohol but expected change to complete the transaction. Martin refused, explaining "that he did not have his change." Maybe not, or perhaps Martin planned to exercise his racial privilege and profit a few extra cents from his commerce with a slave. Jason, a Martin family bondman, then intervened, informing Larken that "he never had that much" and directing the frustrated slave to leave the premises. By this point, Larken determined that he was being cheated: the money he had paid exceeded the value of the drink he received. Larken refused to go, "for he intended to have his change before he went." The dispute ultimately escalated to violence. Jason administered "two blows on the head with a stick," splintering the weapon and "knocking off Larkins cap." Larken, in turn, inflicted a mortal wound in Jason's right side with a knife. The confrontation, which earned Larken one hundred lashes for manslaughter, originated when the workings of the internal economy soured. Larken simply wanted a drink and was willing to pay for it, but he also refused to be duped out of his money. When Jason challenged Larken's claim to his change, violence ensued.²⁶

In addition to disputes over money and property, slaves also came to blows over matters of love and family. The historiography of the slave family has coincided with that on the slave community. Just as John W. Blassingame lauded the slave community, his contemporary Herbert G. Gutman celebrated the resilience of the slave family. Gutman portrayed the typical enslaved family as stable and nuclear, with a male

²⁵ *Ibid.*, microfilm reel C2917, case 160 (first through fourth quotations); *ibid.*, microfilm reel C2919, case 368 (fifth through seventh quotations); *ibid.*, microfilm reel C2917, case 185 (eighth quotation). The case with Amos and Andrew is also mentioned in McDonnell, "Money Knows No Master," 37.

²⁶ Pendleton District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDAH, microfilm reel C2916, case 35; Spartanburg District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDAH, microfilm reel C2920, case 117.

head of household present. For Gutman, whose interpretation dominated historical scholarship for two decades, the institution of family, like Blassingame's slave community, served as a source of strength for slaves resisting the oppression of bondage.²⁷ As Nell Irvin Painter has observed, however, the thrust of the literature made "the institution of 'the black family' [appear] . . . preternaturally immune to the brutality inherent in slavery."²⁸ More recently, historians have suggested that Gutman overestimated the number of two-parent slave households and exaggerated the stability of the enslaved family. They have increasingly recognized that slavery undermined the family and imposed incredible strains on husbands and wives in bondage. Without denying that the slave family was instrumental to slaves' survival, this new generation of scholarship acknowledges the presence of stress, marital strife, and disharmony in the slave family. Examining the slave family through the lens of violence clarifies the gendered experience of slave men within the family unit.²⁹

Historians have now shown that domestic violence often marred slave families.³⁰ Although Emily West uncovered only four cases of slave men sexually abusing bondwomen in the entire collection of Works Progress Administration slave narratives, most black respondents would not have volunteered such information to white interviewers, and domestic violence likely occurred far more frequently than the narratives indicate. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has suggested, in fact, that domestic abuse was rife among slave couples. Brenda Stevenson

²⁷ Gutman, *Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 309–20.

²⁸ Painter, *Southern History Across the Color Line*, 21. Blassingame, *Slave Community*, 171–72, 191; and Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 451–52, 491, remark on the strength of slave families but acknowledge the tremendous obstacles they faced.

²⁹ Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 160–62, 208, 222; Stevenson, "Distress and Discord," 103, 108; Ann Patton Malone, *Sweet Chariot: Slave Family and Household Structure in Nineteenth-Century Louisiana* (Chapel Hill, 1992), chap. 8; Wilma A. Dunaway, *The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation* (Cambridge, Eng., 2003), esp. 268–74. Emily West, "Surviving Separation: Cross-Plantation Marriages and the Slave Trade in Antebellum South Carolina," *Journal of Family History*, 24 (April 1999), 212–31, esp. 213 (quotation) and 225–26, discerns "essentially nuclear families" in antebellum South Carolina, although they did not necessarily live on the same plantation. She still emphasizes the strength and support that the slave family offered.

³⁰ On domestic abuse within slave families, see Stevenson, "Distress and Discord"; Morris, "Within the Slave Cabin"; West, "Tensions"; and Stephanie M. H. Camp, "The Pleasures of Resistance: Enslaved Women and Body Politics in the Plantation South, 1830–1861," *Journal of Southern History*, 68 (August 2002), 533–72, esp. 557–58. Michael P. Johnson conducted a study of infanticide among slaves, but he concluded that slave women did not accidentally or intentionally smother their children as white contemporaries assumed; rather, slave infants suffered from a high incidence of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). The hard work slave women performed, combined with nutritional deficiencies in their diet, made SIDS more prevalent among slave than white infants. See Johnson, "Smothered Slave Infants: Were Slave Mothers at Fault?" *ibid.*, 47 (November 1981), 493–520.

argues that the physical violence present within slave marriages reflected the strains inherent in the system. At root, masters held ultimate authority to decide whom slaves married. Although slaveholders sometimes acquiesced to bondpeople's own preferences and desires, others matched slave couples with gross disregard for their feelings, pairing couples lacking mutual attraction, affection, or emotional attachment. Many enslaved spouses so callously thrust together would not have loved or respected one another, creating a breeding ground for domestic abuse.³¹

While either enslaved partner might engage in spousal abuse, slave men were more likely to resort to physical aggression, women to verbal abuse. This pattern held in upcountry South Carolina. In Pendleton District Lemuel Hall's bondman Tom "violently Beat and abused" John McPhail's slave woman Mariah after she had "talked crossly" to him, calling him "a scape Gallow son of a Bitch." One witness claimed, however, that "Mariah in fact did not curse . . . much untill she was . . . abused." In 1843 Major P. L. Calhoun rushed to his slave quarters in Laurens District to investigate "an unusual uproar at one [of] the Negro houses." There he found William, the property of Elizabeth East, holding the slave woman Ann "by the throat & beating her severely with a large hickory," "at least thirty lashes." Ordered to explain himself, William "replied she had used blackguard language to some of the other negroes & to him." Although it is not certain from the records that these were cross-plantation couples, both cases hint at marital discord and enslaved husbands exercising physical dominance over their wives.³²

Enslavement, many scholars have observed, directly challenged male slaves' manhood. The master exercised the final authority over the slave family. Without legal sanction of slave marriages, slaveholders retained the prerogative to break up the enslaved family unit at any time. Enslaved husbands could not protect their wives from physical or sexual abuse by their owners without risking great bodily harm to themselves. When masters whipped slave men in front of their families, they undercut male slaves' pretensions to authority over their wives and children. Moreover, despite making at-times-heroic efforts

³¹ West, "Tensions," 6; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 1988), 296; Stevenson, "Distress and Discord," 117–18, 122.

³² Pendleton District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDAH, microfilm reel C2916, case 9; Folder 9, Box 1, Laurens District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, 1808–1865, SCDAH.

to provide basic necessities and material comforts for their families, slave men typically did not supply the bulk of their families' essential needs. All these factors restricted the power male slaves maintained in their day-to-day lives within the dominant white society.³³

Violence, however, permitted slave men to display their manhood in the quarters. There, male slaves could channel the anger and frustration they repressed when around the master and liberate themselves temporarily from their powerlessness. Some slave men exerted control over their spouses and families through violence. If Tom and William were slave husbands disciplining their wives, then the abuse the men inflicted may have represented an effort to establish their primacy as the head of the household. Likewise, when Spartanburg District slaves Asa and Peggy quarreled in 1849 over whether "to cut a Pound Cake," they may have been negotiating household relations of power. Did Asa, as the man, dictate that decision, or did Peggy, as the woman customarily in charge of domestic responsibilities such as food preparation? For her part, Peggy claimed that "if she was a man . . . she would whip Asa for the way that he had treated her."³⁴

Domestic abuse constituted only one category within a much broader range of violent confrontations in the slave quarters. As Rebecca Griffin has shown, courtship was a source of conflict and competition among slave men. Male slaves took the lead in the courtship process, and in contests for female affection, rival slave suitors might come to blows. One upcountry slave man, as per a conjurer's instructions, thrashed a competing admirer about the face with a length of grapevine.³⁵ The desire to sustain loving relationships extended

³³ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 490–91, 494; Blassingame, *Slave Community*, 164–65, 172; Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 296–97, 326, 374; Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 161, 240; Stevenson, "Distress and Discord," 108, 111–13, 120–21; Morris, "Within the Slave Cabin," 271, 273; West, "Tensions," 4–5; Stevenson, "Gender Convention," 180; Melton A. McLaurin, *Celia, a Slave* (1991; new ed., New York, 2002), 139–40; Joshua D. Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787–1861* (Chapel Hill, 2003), 139.

³⁴ Blassingame, *Slave Community*, 311, 322; Wyatt-Brown, "Mask of Obedience," 1246; Stevenson, "Distress and Discord," 115; Morris, "Within the Slave Cabin," 272; Spartanburg District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDAH, microfilm reel C2920, case 106 (quotations). Like the cases of Tom and William, there is no evidence in the records that Asa and Peggy were a couple; the case, however, does smack of a domestic squabble. Although not my focus here, when slave mothers and fathers physically punished their children, they not only corrected their offspring for a specific infraction but also instilled a respect for parental authority that was undermined when masters disciplined slave parents in front of their progeny. On this issue see Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington, 1995), 97.

³⁵ Rebecca Griffin, "Courtship Contests and the Meaning of Conflict in the Folklore of Slaves," *Journal of Southern History*, 71 (November 2005), 769–802, esp. 770–71, 780, 785,

from courtship to slave marriages. Southern whites routinely recognized slave marriage as a cultural institution even as masters rendered it meaningless in southern law and violated its inherent sanctity. Many slave men confronted the anguish of white men sexually exploiting the enslaved men's female partners, but each man in the slave quarters also had to guard against the sexual incursion of other bondmen upon any woman he claimed as his own. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese notes that, without the legal sanction of marriage, bondmen routinely lost their wives to other slave men. It was when other slaves rather than white men seduced slaves' wives, however, that bondmen were more apt to respond violently. In Anderson District Charles Irby's slave Bas and "Duckworth's Joe" fought because "they fell out about a woman." A Laurens District slave died after "there was a fuss about Wills wife," and the murderous bondman was warned "dont go there." Similarly, in nearby Fairfield District Sampson struck Manuel a fatal blow in 1857 over "some difficulty concerning a negro Girl his wife which arose from Jeolesy between him and the boy."³⁶

Enslaved men asserted their manhood when they protected and defended slave women from the sexual overtures of other bondmen. In Anderson District George, a slave hired out to an H. Cobb, assaulted Elijah Wyatt's slave Len "with a heavy stick." "George," testimony revealed, "had complained of Len's talking & mischief making with a female slave in the employ of Mr. Cobb." Former slave Henry Gladney recalled that his father "didn't 'low other slave men to look at my mammy. I see him grab Uncle Phil once, throw him down on de floor, and when him quit stompin' Uncle Phil, they have to send for Dr. Newton, 'cause pappy done broke Uncle Phil's right leg." Daniel Cochran's slave Jeff ordered Emory, property of Jacob P. Reed, "out of his house" in Anderson District. He was upset that Emory was "run-

799–801; George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*. Vol. 3: *South Carolina Narratives*, Pt. 3 (Westport, Conn., 1972), 78–79. As Griffin notes, "Conflict between slaves caused by courtship competition has not been widely studied." See Griffin, "Courtship Contests," 786n51. For an overview of the place of sexuality in the slave quarters, see Steven E. Brown, "Sexuality and the Slave Community," *Phylon*, 42 (Spring 1981), 1–10.

³⁶ Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 244; Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 327; Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDH, microfilm reel C2917, case 185; Folder 67, Box 1, Laurens District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, 1808–1865, SCDH; Folder 34, Fairfield District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, 1839–1865, SCDH. According to Fox-Genovese, "a high level of violence resulted from slave men's inability to exercise the domination over women that most societies have awarded to men." See Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 327.

ning after Becky,” Jeff’s wife. In the same district, Warren, a slave of Peter K. Norris, repeatedly threatened to kill Charles Barrett’s bondman Dan. Although Warren and his wife had been “apart 12 months,” he “accused Dan of being after” her and believed them altogether “too thick.” Separated for a year, Warren still could not stomach the thought of his onetime wife with another man. And nearer the Lowcountry, in Clarendon District, the slave John’s efforts to defend his wife Lavinia, who reportedly had “the name of being a strumpet,” cost him his own life. John fought with E. G. DuBose’s slave Henry because the latter “would visit Johns house” and “trouble his wife.” John got the worse of the struggle, however, when Henry beat John’s head with an iron rod, killing him. The “cause of [the] disturbance,” confirmed a bondman at the coroner’s inquest, was “jealously [*sic*].”³⁷

Jealousy may have been so pronounced among slave men in the South Carolina upcountry due to the large number of cross-plantation marriages there. Emily West recently estimated that abroad marriages accounted for 34 percent of slave households in antebellum South Carolina.³⁸ She also notes, however, that cross-plantation unions were more prevalent where slaveholdings were smaller. On small holdings, young, single slaves may have had no suitable mates or, at the very least, fewer potential spouses from whom to choose. To avoid violating marriage taboos, slaves on small farms and plantations necessarily had to seek partners elsewhere.³⁹ Holdings in the South Carolina upcountry were considerably smaller than in other portions of the state, so cross-plantation marriages there likely exceeded the one-third figure for the state as a whole. Masters across the Old South sometimes frowned upon abroad marriages as detrimental to the control of their slaves.

³⁷ West, “Tensions,” 5; Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDH, microfilm reel C2918, case 278 (first through third quotations); Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, vol. 2, pt. 2, p. 129 (fourth quotation); Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDH, microfilm reel C2918, case 264 (fifth and sixth quotations); *ibid.*, microfilm reel C2775, case 394 (seventh through ninth quotations); Folder 4, Clarendon District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, 1863–1865, SCDH (tenth through fourteenth quotations). Henry was found guilty and sentenced to two weeks in prison and 150 lashes. For a case of two slaves fighting over a slave woman in Virginia, see Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 147–48.

³⁸ West, “Surviving Separation,” 222; Emily West, “The Debate on the Strength of Slave Families: South Carolina and the Importance of Cross-Plantation Marriages,” *Journal of American Studies*, 33 (August 1999), 221–41, esp. 221–22; West, “Masters and Marriages, Profits and Paternalism: Slave Owners’ Perspectives on Cross-Plantation Unions in Antebellum South Carolina,” *Slavery and Abolition*, 21 (April 2000), 56–72, esp. 56.

³⁹ West, “Surviving Separation,” 223; West, “Debate on the Strength of Slave Families,” 227; West, “Masters and Marriages,” 58, 66.

Moreover, when one slaveholder's bondman fathered children on a neighboring plantation, the resulting offspring augmented the wealth of the master of the slave mother.⁴⁰ Such reservations confronted demographic realities in the South Carolina upcountry, however. With the preponderance of small holdings in the upcountry, many masters appear to have set aside any qualms about cross-plantation unions.

Abroad marriages held particular appeal for slave men. Gender conventions among bondpeople held that male slaves initiated courtships and that husbands did the traveling to visit abroad spouses.⁴¹ Cross-plantation marriages, then, not only gave slave men a sense of personal autonomy in making their own marital choices but also awarded them a degree of mobility and time away from the home plantation.⁴² The relative freedom of movement helped slave men with abroad spouses create their own "social space" or "rival geography" distinct from that of their masters.⁴³ Masters abetted this process, typically granting bondmen passes on the weekends to call on partners living abroad, although slave men sometimes made unauthorized visits during the week at the risk of encountering the patrol.⁴⁴ Despite their bondage, Emily West concludes, slave men involved in cross-plantation unions "saw themselves as initiators, protectors, and providers."⁴⁵ West provides an overwhelmingly positive assessment of cross-plantation marriages. Slaves' commitment to them, she insists, suggests "the strength of slave families" and "the wider resilience of the slave community." Indeed, West contends, the maintenance of cross-plantation ties resisted threats to the slave family, for the vitality of abroad marriages permitted enslaved families and the slave community the strength to cope with and survive local separation or sale.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ West, "Masters and Marriages," 57; Kaye, "Neighbourhoods and Solidarity," 7.

⁴¹ West, "Debate on the Strength of Slave Families," 223, 236; West, "Masters and Marriages," 64; Kaye, "Neighbourhoods and Solidarity," 7.

⁴² West, "Surviving Separation," 223; West, "Masters and Marriages," 57.

⁴³ West, "Debate on the Strength of Slave Families," 239; Rebecca J. Griffin, "'Goin' Back Over There to See That Girl': Competing Social Spaces in the Lives of the Enslaved in Antebellum North Carolina," *Slavery and Abolition*, 25 (April 2004), 94–113. On the concept of "rival geography" applied to southern slaves, see Stephanie M. H. Camp, "'I Could Not Stay There': Enslaved Women, Truancy and the Geography of Everyday Forms of Resistance in the Antebellum Plantation South," *Slavery and Abolition*, 23 (December 2002), 1–20; and Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill, 2004).

⁴⁴ West, "Surviving Separation," 223; West, "Debate on the Strength of Slave Families," 236; West, "Masters and Marriages," 64, 65.

⁴⁵ West, "Debate on the Strength of Slave Families," 223.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 222, 238; West, "Masters and Marriages," 56 (second quotation); West, "Surviving Separation," 212–13, 217, 220, 222, 224–25, 228.

Peter Kolchin acknowledges such advantages as mobility that abroad marriages held for slaves, but he describes cross-plantation unions on the whole as detrimental to “family stability” and “communal loyalty.” Evidence from the South Carolina upcountry lends support to his contention. In a region of relatively small plantations, slaves’ marriage market proved more limited compared with areas across the South where slaveholding was more widespread. Realistically, the time available for travel on the weekends restricted slaves’ options for cross-plantation mates to partners within a reasonable distance, usually less than a day’s walk (longer if a slave was fortunate enough to have access to a horse). Aware of their circumscribed social geography and a rough estimate of marriageable women within it, slave men often resented other bondmen who came onto a plantation wooing eligible female slaves or slave women already claimed by bondmen at home. The cases of slave men jealously defending female slaves from the sexual advances of other black men laid bare one part of the process through which bondmen defined the boundaries of their community. Some slaves were welcome; others were not. And sometimes it was a matter of sheer numbers. A case from Spartanburg District illustrates the tension among slave men as they vied for bondwomen in the South Carolina upcountry. William Waldrip’s “two negro boys” had “wives at Sampson Bobo’s” by September 1843, but apparently “another one of the Old Gentleman’s boys was . . . trying to get a wife there, too.” Bondpeople on surrounding plantations knew it and figured that a third was too many. When asked “what would be the consequences if one man were to take another man’s wife,” one slave man replied that “it would be near about a death crime.” Willis W. Dickie’s bondman Aleck agreed. He averred that “if any man was to take his wife he believes he should kill him.” This conversation raised suspicions against Aleck when the “negro man Allen” turned up dead. Allen was one of William Waldrip’s slaves who had a wife (or was trying to secure one) on Sampson Bobo’s plantation. Allen left one Saturday to visit her and was not seen again until Tuesday, when his “badly beaten” body was found near Sampson Bobo’s, “covered up at the root of a tree which had been blown down.” Allen’s skull had been fractured by “some Clubbs” lying next to his corpse. Sampson Bobo swore before the magistrate that William Waldrip’s own slave Dick had killed Allen, and Waldrip identified four other slaves, including Aleck and Bobo’s slave women Grace and Randy, as accomplices. Aleck’s incriminating conversation, it was revealed, “did not allude to

Sampson Bobos negroes, but [to] some one over the river.” Testimony does not disclose what role Grace and Randy supposedly played in the murder, and they and Aleck all earned a verdict of not guilty. Regrettably incomplete, the trial papers nevertheless vividly expose the seething passions sometimes unleashed over the relationships of bondmen and bondwomen and the fierce competition for mates in regions like the upcountry with relatively few slaves.⁴⁷

Inevitably, despite the vigilant efforts of slave men to prevent it, their female partners sometimes slept with other bondmen. Brenda Stevenson describes adultery as an “internal problem” that “rocked slave families or communities,” a phenomenon fostered by the tenuousness of a marital institution that was denied the force of law and thus existed only by the will of the master. Knowledge that slave families could be torn asunder at the master’s whim, she suggests, could undermine slaves’ commitment to their marriages and produce rates of infidelity higher than if the slaveholding society had placed greater value on the slave family. Adultery emerged as a leading cause of marital difficulties for slave couples and as a source of violence within slave families. Spartanburg District’s Philadelphia Baptist Church received a charge in 1839 “against William a black Bro[ther] for disordily conduc[t] also against Betsey his Wife for striking of her husband.” As revealed the following month, William had committed “Adultry,” the certain cause of Betsey’s rage. Usually, however, slave men inflicted the violence sparked by an unfaithful spouse, as they were, according to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “faced with the women’s more or less open infidelity” in the quarters. Returning from a Christmas dance in Anderson District in 1855, Ezekiel Murphy’s hand Ed came upon a crowd of slave revelers and pulled a pistol on William J. Duckworth’s bondman George, saying that George was “a damned rascal in beding with my wife every night.” George denied the accusation, calling it “a damned lie,” but the cuckolded Ed said otherwise and vowed to “blow out his damned brains.” All the slaves had likely been drinking at the ball, causing tempers to flare. A fight had led to the premature breaking up of the dance, and “several fracascs” erupted on the road that night. Cooler heads prevailed, however, before Ed could carry through on his threats. Ed was not alone among up-country slaves in suspecting his wife of infidelity. Pendleton District

⁴⁷ Kolchin, “Reevaluating the Antebellum Slave Community,” 584; Spartanburg District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDAB, microfilm reel C2920, case 58.

bondman Tom, accused of beating John McPhail's slave woman Mariah in 1824, had confided to a friend that "Mariah had the clap," which naturally must have raised questions in his mind about her faithfulness (or possibly his own). Perhaps it was uncertain paternity that sparked a tumult "with sticks and Knives" between Anderson District slaves Simon and Sam "about a chile that Hetta had." Adulterous liaisons could come to light in any number of ways, and when they did, slave men were frequently driven to violence.⁴⁸

The loss of a woman to another slave man bred resentment and sometimes nourished a craving for violent retribution. George, the Anderson District slave who had beaten Elijah Wyatt's slave Len for "mischief making" with George's employer's slave woman, clashed also with Tom, another bondman of Elijah Wyatt's and presumably a friend of Len's. Within three or four months of George's scuffle with Len, Tom publicly "boasted of having separated . . . George & his wife" and uttered repeated threats against the bondman. Trial papers make no specific indication of what Tom had done to break up George's marriage or why. Had he slept with George's wife? If so, did he love her, had he pursued her for casual sex, or was he retaliating sexually against George for pummeling Len? Regardless, Tom claimed responsibility for "the wife of slave George driving him off," and George planned to take vengeance on Tom for the separation. In December 1854, "in the negro house of Daniel Mattison," George assaulted Tom, striking him "a severe blow or two with a pistol." He also threatened to shoot Tom with the gun, which Mattison's slave Isaac affirmed was authentic "& not merely a representation made of wood." (Apparently slaves sometimes carried fake, wooden pistols.) George cocked his brass firearm "& several times presented it as if to shoot Tom but was prevented by . . . Isaac." The neighborhood drama ended without loss of life but with George's manhood avenged.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 255 (first and second quotations); Stevenson, "Distress and Discord," 122–23; West, "Tensions," 7, 11; entries for April–May 1839, Minutes of Philadelphia Baptist Church, Pauline, South Carolina [1803–1919], SCDAH, microfilm (third and fourth quotations); Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 327 (fifth quotation); Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDAH, microfilm reel C2919, case 292 (sixth through ninth quotations); Pendleton District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDAH, microfilm reel C2916, case 9 (tenth quotation); Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDAH, microfilm reel C2775, case 398 (eleventh and twelfth quotations).

⁴⁹ Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDAH, microfilm reel C2918, case 278. Christopher Morris offers two similar cases in his work. In Mississippi, slave Harrison murdered a fellow bondman for saying of Harrison's wife, "he might help himself

The willingness of slave men to use violence to uphold and enforce their business dealings, defend their women, or take vengeance on other male slaves who had successfully violated their sexual claims points to the significance of a code of honor among slaves; a language of honor infused their behavior in both their economic and personal lives. Scholars have long noted that a culture of honor flourished among southern white men, but Bertram Wyatt-Brown excepted, southern historians have been much slower than their counterparts studying Latin America to recognize honor among slaves.⁵⁰ Sociologist Orlando Patterson famously characterized the slave as, by definition, “a person without honor,” and certainly southern whites routinely dishonored slaves in their daily lives. They stripped bondpeople publicly for inspection at slave auctions and inflicted beatings in front of family and friends. Whippings provided the most enduring, visible reminder of slaves’ subordination; the lash left disfiguring scars on their backs that served as an indelible marker of their inferior position in southern society. Absent an acute understanding of honor—and its inverse, shame—slaves would not have felt the profound humiliation of a whipping so evident in their narratives and autobiographies.⁵¹

Yet slaves’ degradation in white society only served to enhance their sense of honor among themselves. As Wyatt-Brown has explained,

if he could.” In Louisiana, Lewis slayed Henry “[b]ecause I found him in my cabin with my wife.” See Morris, “Within the Slave Cabin,” 272.

⁵⁰ On honor in the Old South, see Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*; Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*; Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, the Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, and Gambling in the Old South* (Princeton, 1996); and Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s–1890s* (Chapel Hill, 2001). On honor among slaves, see Wyatt-Brown, “Mask of Obedience”; Jeff Forret, “Slave–Poor White Violence in the Antebellum Carolinas,” *North Carolina Historical Review*, 81 (April 2004), 139–67, esp. 144–46; and the following works on Latin America: Sandra Lauderdale Graham, “Honor among Slaves,” in Lyman L. Johnson and Sonya Lipsett-Rivera, eds., *The Faces of Honor: Sex, Shame, and Violence in Colonial Latin America* (Albuquerque, 1998), 201–28; Richard Boyer, “Honor among Plebeians,” *ibid.*, 161–64; and Lyman L. Johnson, “Dangerous Words, Provocative Gestures, and Violent Acts,” *ibid.*, 130, 141. In locating honor in slaves’ economic transactions, my interpretation accepts Ariela J. Gross’s assertion that a code of honor could coexist alongside the values of the market among inhabitants of the antebellum South. See Gross, *Double Character: Slavery and Mastery in the Antebellum Southern Courtroom* (Princeton, 2000), 52. The ensuing discussion of honor will focus on slave men. Further research is necessary to explore the subject of honor among slave women. Among white women, honor was typically defined in sexual terms, a reference to white female virtue and purity. This definition of honor for slave women would have proved problematic, given not only masters’ penchant for seeking sexual gratification in the slave quarters but also the above discussion concerning fidelity among slaves when marriage was not legally recognized.

⁵¹ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 12 (quotation); Gross, *Double Character*, 51–52.

"Male honor was richly prized in the slave quarters." Slaves dwelled in a circumscribed social space in which face-to-face encounters punctuated their daily lives. A code of honor tends to thrive in such locations and societies where personal relationships more than anonymous bureaucratic structures shape the contours of human existence. Unacknowledged by southern whites, however, "slave honor was confined to the slave quarters." The circumstances prompting violent encounters, the words uttered during confrontations, and the fighting techniques utilized showed that the ethic of honor so prevalent in southern white society was ingrained in masculine slave culture as well.⁵²

Possessing their own keenly developed sense of honor, slave men valued status and reputation, and in contests analogous to those among white participants, they vied for rank and honor among themselves. Bondmen employed violence to redress grievances and thereby prevent any loss of honor. Male slaves acted as honorable men when they quickly defended wives, family, and friends from any slights or aspersions. In 1851 Spartanburg District slave Bassett struck Joseph with "a large stick" for "abusing his wife." In Pendleton District the slave "Leu Give the first Challeng." He "Cursed Dianna," a bondwoman of Jonathan Fealding, "& Calld her a Damnd Bitch." Jack, another slave belonging to Fealding, immediately cried out, "Dont you abuse my sister," and Leu found himself on the receiving end of the brawl that followed. Aron Motes, a slave in Laurens District, complained that other bondpeople at a corn shucking "were trying to run over Perry," another Motes family slave, "and he would not allow it." When the loyal "Aron said they should not impose on Perry or he would bust their heads," he rallied in support of a fellow bondman. As with southern whites, slaves might invoke the concept of honor to justify violence or the threat of it.⁵³

With honor at a premium, slave men vocalized their readiness to protect themselves and their loved ones with violence. Their assertions and threats not only provided a warning to an adversary but also announced to enslaved audiences or anyone within earshot that they would not submit meekly to another slave's insult or challenge. Threats

⁵² Wyatt-Brown, "Mask of Obedience," 1249. Under certain circumstances, white men could acknowledge that slave men had honor with respect to one another, but not relative to any white man. See Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 161.

⁵³ Spartanburg District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDH, microfilm reel C2920, case 128; Pendleton District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDH, microfilm reel C2916, case 20; Folder 67, Box 1, Laurens District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, 1808–1865, SCDH.

preceded violence among slaves by mere moments to as long as weeks. In Anderson District Hew Wilson's slave "Charles said that he would knock Moses head off" before they in fact "attempted to kill Each other contrary to the lawes of this state." Also in Anderson District, Jake informed Baylis that "he could whip him." He then violated Baylis's physical space by shoving "his fist in Baylis' face." Baylis instructed him to desist, but defiantly, "Jake said he would put his hand on him as he pleased" and proceeded to "[p]ut his hands on his shoulders." After one more warning to "keep his hands off of him," Baylis gave Jake a sharp kick. A Spartanburg District slave named Jason approached the bondman Larken, reporting the rumor that the latter had said he could "whip" Jason. Larken replied, "Goddamn you if you will follow me to the end of the lane I can do it."⁵⁴

Male slaves' ritual boasts and challenges reverberated throughout the quarters. Although not as elaborate or fanciful in their inflated words as the bragging of the "half wild horse and half cock-eyed alligator" Mike Fink and other semilegendary or wholly fictional characters in the southwestern humor genre, slaves nevertheless employed the exaggeration and masculine boasting reminiscent of the Old Southwest's tall tales. At a Laurens District corn shucking, a dispute erupted in which "Aron boasted of his manhood" and crowed that "he was the best man there." Pendleton District slave Leu similarly declared himself "the best man of the Turff," right before other bondpeople deflated his ego by beating him into submission. Several cases in Anderson District featured proud slave men. Toney announced that "he would whip Dick or any other negro that accused him of stealing leather" or "talked about him," because "he had as many wepons as any one els." One Saturday night, the bondman Lewis averred that Jackson Wilson's "Ben nor no other man should curse him." When Ben, reluctant to yield, dared to say "he would curse him or any other man," Lewis shoved him. Ben responded by stabbing Lewis with a knife. On the way back from a Christmas ball, the slave Ed also engaged in loud talk, bragging that he "could whip any man in the crowd except freinds." He "jumped up[,] slaped his hands together[,] and said . . . I dont fear no man." For good reason: Ed "drew a pistol" and warned his fellow slave

⁵⁴ Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDAH, microfilm reel C2919, case 371 (first and second quotations); *ibid.*, microfilm reel C2917, case 160 (third through seventh quotations); Spartanburg District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDAH, microfilm reel C2920, case 117 (eighth and ninth quotations).

revelers to “stand back Gentlemen.” When one voice in the crowd, perhaps not believing his eyes, questioned if Ed really did have a gun, the armed slave snapped “that he did not tell no damned nigger what he had.” The possession of a firearm enhanced Ed’s self-esteem and, as he believed, commanded the respect of all his fellow slaves, whom he degraded beneath himself in dismissing them as “damned nigger[s].” Nero displayed similar bravado when he declared “that he was man a nuff ” to draw his knife and stab Griffin Brazeale’s slave Sam multiple times “for no Reson or caus what ever.”⁵⁵

Complementing such braggadocio, verbal assaults frequently served as a prelude to physically violent encounters among slaves. Insults offer an unconventional pathway into the culture in which the offending words were uttered. Individual cultures betray certain patterns of insults reflective of that culture’s values. Insults function by way of a shared cultural language. They make sense because they strike inversely at that which society deems proper, respectable, and desirable, thereby revealing, in the negative, the social values of a given culture. Analyzing insults is particularly useful in the study of subaltern peoples, such as slaves, who leave relatively little written documentation of their own creation. Insults often provoke violence, and violent episodes generate a paper trail of official records. Although these records are filtered through a white prism, reading such evidence of insults backward exposes social tensions and the origins of disputes, laying bare the mutual cultural understandings of the parties involved. By their nature, insults show disrespect, attack honor, and damage reputation. Slandorous words impinge on one’s social rank and status, elevating the slanderer and degrading the slandered. Collectively, slaves already occupied a debased position in southern society, so insults spoken by the master, however personally hurtful, proved essentially meaningless in the broader perspective. When slaves spit verbal venom upon one another, however, it stung, for slaves were

⁵⁵ Gorn, ““Gouge and Bite,”” 28–31 (first quotation on 29); Edward E. Baptist, “Accidental Ethnography in an Antebellum Southern Newspaper: Snell’s Homecoming Festival,” *Journal of American History*, 84 (March 1998), 1355–83; Folder 67, Box 1, Laurens District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, 1808–1865, SCDH (second and third quotations); Pendleton District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDH, microfilm reel C2916, case 20 (fourth quotation); Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDH, microfilm reel C2775, case 400 (fifth through seventh quotations); *ibid.*, microfilm reel C2917, case 195 (eighth and ninth quotations); *ibid.*, microfilm reel C2919, case 292 (tenth through fifteenth quotations); *ibid.*, microfilm reel C2917, case 189 (sixteenth and seventeenth quotations).

peers inhabiting the same social plane. If one's equal voiced the insult, it mattered: one slave was attempting to establish superiority or dominance over another and to deny the second slave's expectation of treatment as an equal. Their relationship was no longer reciprocal, but instead imbalanced. With social identity challenged through insult, the target of the offensive language might resort to violence to reestablish the social equilibrium.⁵⁶

Courts of Magistrates and Freeholders records reveal a limited range of insults slaves hurled at one another. Students of African American culture have described creative verbal sparring and dueling among blacks—playing the dozens—as a ritual contest. The very structure of these oral performances instilled discipline and emotional control in the participants, precluding the eruption of violence. The known insults upcountry South Carolina slaves employed lacked the oral agility and theatrical wordplay of the dozens. To the contrary, their blunt, forceful, and offensive words provoked violence. Some trial papers document only that a slave used “sasey language,” but at times the records are more explicit, providing a verbatim transcript as recalled by the witnesses. Bondpeople adopted *bitch* when referring to enslaved women and *son of a bitch* to describe slave men, verbally locating their adversary on the subhuman level of dogs. In Anderson District the slave Ed called William J. Duckworth's slave George a “damned son of a bitch” because George did allegedly “bed up with my wife every night,” and bondman “Jeff said Emory was a reel footed sun of a bitch.” Bondmen sometimes called male slaves rascals or rogues as well. E. G. DuBose's slave Henry called John “a dam raskel,” and Jake complained that “Baylis had cursed him like a dammd rascal.” When Anderson District slave Steve refused to hand over “what he owed him,” the cheated bondman “Jess cald him a damned rogue.” The terms *rascal* and *rogue* both refer to someone judged dishonest, unprincipled,

⁵⁶ On insults providing clues to culture in the Americas, see Peter N. Moogk, “‘Thieving Buggers’ and ‘Stupid Sluts’: Insults and Popular Culture in New France,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 36 (October 1979), 524–47; Mary Beth Norton, “Gender and Defamation in Seventeenth-Century Maryland,” *ibid.*, 44 (January 1987), 3–39; Cheryl English Martin, “Popular Speech and Social Order in Northern Mexico, 1650–1830,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 32 (April 1990), 305–24; Kirsten Fischer, “‘False, Feigned, and Scandalous Words’: Sexual Slander and Racial Ideology Among Whites in Colonial North Carolina,” in Catherine Clinton and Michele Gillespie, eds., *The Devil's Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South* (New York, 1997), 139–53; Richard Boyer, “Respect and Identity: Horizontal and Vertical Reference Points in Speech Acts,” *Americas*, 54 (April 1998), 491–509; and Sonya Lipsett-Rivera, “*De Obra y Palabra*: Patterns of Insults in Mexico, 1750–1856,” *ibid.*, 511–39.

or mischievous, suggesting that in the quarters, slaves revered honesty, fairness, and trustworthiness. By identifying the scoundrels among them, slaves demarcated clear boundaries that excluded certain slaves from the social group for violating cultural expectations of approved behavior.⁵⁷

Entrenched in the honor of the quarters, slaves also bristled when other bondmen gave them the lie. Giving the lie—calling someone a liar, questioning his word, and hence divorcing him from the culture of honor—provoked countless battles in honor-bound southern white society, but the topic is unexplored among the enslaved. Masters believed that slaves chronically lied; bondpeople told falsehoods, pretended to be ill, broke or misplaced tools to avoid work, and stole with impunity. It was no accident that the law prohibited slave testimony against white defendants in southern courtrooms. “Whites,” Kenneth S. Greenberg writes, “assumed that slaves lied all the time—and that their lies were intimately connected to their position as slaves.” Indeed they were linked, not because slaves lacked honor but because lying was a necessary part of slaves’ performance—of the mask they wore—in the presence of whites. Whereas slaves routinely lied to whites, they expected honesty and truthfulness among themselves. Three cases from Anderson District demonstrate the umbrage they took when a fellow slave accused them of deceit. “[T]he dam lie passed” between Charles Irby’s slave George and John S. Carter’s Jim, the latter of whom admitted to carrying a pistol as he left a Christmas dance. A trio of slaves testified that they “heard Bas give Joe the Dam lie” as “they cursed one another a while,” and Martin Hall’s bondman Dandy “threw a stone and hit Jim,” the property of T. W. West, “in the side & wounded him sever[e]ly” because Jim “give the God dam lye.” If slaves possessed no sense of honor, as southern whites claimed, it would not have mattered whether another bondperson had “given the lie.” That slaves responded promptly and violently suggests a compelling need to defend the honor they knew they possessed.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 347–48, 358; Folder 33, Box 1, Kershaw District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, 1800–1861, SCDH (first quotation); Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDH, microfilm reel C2919, case 292 (second and third quotations); *ibid.*, microfilm reel C2918, case 264 (fourth quotation); Folder 4, Clarendon District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, 1863–1865, SCDH (fifth quotation); Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDH, microfilm reel C2917, case 160 (sixth quotation); *ibid.*, microfilm reel C2919, case 368 (seventh and eighth quotations).

⁵⁸ Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery*, 8, 12, 40, 11 (first and second quotations), 32; Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDH, microfilm reel C2919, case

The derogatory “fighting words” anchored in the language of honor sparked conflicts involving fists, sticks, rocks, knives, and fence rails, but slave men also utilized the rough-and-tumble fighting techniques more common among lower-class white brawlers. Rough-and-tumble fighting flourished in the southern backwoods and upcountry regions not yet fully incorporated into the market economy. There, values of the market had yet to penetrate and overwhelm the rural values of a semisubsistence agricultural society. In such close-knit localities, the ethic of honor bound neighbors together. Southern gentlemen scoffed at lower-class claims to honor, but the rough-and-tumbles characteristic of the upcountry showed that its white residents, though socioeconomically inferior to the southern gentry, were no less men. They willingly sacrificed their bodies, exposing themselves to ear-bitings and eye-gougings, in defense of honor, reputation, and community standing. Contests among slaves displayed some occasional overlap with the fighting styles of lower-class whites. In Pendleton District the slave “Jack bit off p[ar]t of one of Lue^s Ears”; Pickens District bondman Jesse was charged with “Biting Wiley[’s] Right year off”; and when William Duckworth’s slave Ned attacked Steve in Anderson District, he “bit of[f] a peace of his year.” Archibald Nicholes’s slave Elijah appeared in court in 1845, charged with “fighting and abusing Dick the property of Cannon Brazeale.” Dick testified that Elijah “threw him twice Down on the ground[,] struck with his fist[,] gouged him and scr[at]ched him.” As with lower-class whites, for some slave men the ritual violence of ear-biting and eye-gouging represented a form of manly assertion in a society that denied their claims to honor. Male slaves who participated in rough-and-tumbles verified their manhood to themselves and to the enslaved spectators looking on.⁵⁹

Slave men, then, protected their women, settled scores with enemy bondmen, issued threats, boasted of their manhood, brooked no insults, and entered into rough-and-tumbles designed to inflict permanent scars

292 (third quotation); *ibid.*, microfilm reel C2917, case 185 (fourth and fifth quotations); *ibid.*, microfilm reel C2775, case 384 (sixth through eighth quotations).

⁵⁹ William B. Taylor, *Drinking, Homicide and Rebellion in Colonial Mexican Villages* (Stanford, 1979), 159 (first quotation); Gorn, ““Gouge and Bite,”” 34, 21, 33, 41; Pendleton District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDAB, microfilm reel C2916, case 20 (second quotation); Folder 11, Pickens District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, 1829–1862, SCDAB (third quotation); Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDAB, microfilm reel C2918, case 261 (fourth quotation); *ibid.*, microfilm reel C2917, case 167 (fifth and sixth quotations). Jesse (who is also referred to in the records as *Jess*) and Wiley also appear in McDonnell, “Money Knows No Master,” 38.

on the loser. Some of this behavior was undoubtedly informed by generations of tradition preceding enslavement; however, by the antebellum decades, most slaves were African Americans, having been born and reared in the Old South. Blacks and whites culturally borrowed from one another freely and frequently in southern society, and the environment in which slaves lived greatly conditioned the way honor manifested itself in the quarters. Too many parallels existed between honor in the slave quarters and honor in white society, and specifically in lower-class white society, to be a matter of coincidence. At least in upcountry South Carolina, slave and poor white men shared a common culture of violence. Through their routine contacts—drinking, gambling, socializing, trading—they engaged in a process of cultural exchange. Through these transactions, male slaves imbibed lower-class white definitions and expressions of honor. Some of what they learned overlapped with the expectations of their own culture; some was new. After Jesse accused Wiley of stealing his tobacco, the white James P. Jenkins of Pickens District informed Wiley that if he “wold tak the like of that he was no man attall.” Only after a white man reminded the slave of the rules of honor as he understood them did a brawl commence between the slaves. But was this prompt necessary? Jesse and Wiley may have been preparing to fight anyway, or they may have preferred to delay their confrontation until no whites were present. If so, Jenkins’s remark only reinforced sentiments already welling up inside the bondmen and gave the go-ahead for them to unleash their violent emotions in his presence without delay or fear of reprisal. Or maybe Jenkins was simply picking a fight between two bondmen for his own amusement.⁶⁰

Slave men seemed to understand that their sense of honor had its limitations within the constraints of southern white society. In Anderson District, for instance, the slave Lewis had jettisoned his hat and umbrella while frantically escaping the patrol. This earned notice in the quarters. Slave Aaron remarked “that he would have fought a duel before any body should have taken his hat from him that way,” and that

⁶⁰ Folder 11, Pickens District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, 1829–1862, SCDAH. On the range of slave–poor white contacts, see Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Southern Countryside* (Baton Rouge, 2006). Lawrence T. McDonnell perhaps underestimates the cultural interplay between blacks and whites when he writes that slaves “emulated manly white behavior, boasting, carrying weapons, . . . parading a desperate, overblown, paper-thin honor.” See McDonnell, “Money Knows No Master,” 38.

he was willing to “loose every drop of blood in him before he would give up his hat and umbrella” as Lewis had. “Six or Eight negroes” who heard this, however, “all busted out in a Laugh.” What was so funny? Interpreting humor over time proves difficult because modern observers of the past must reconstruct the cultural matrix in which the humorous comment or situation occurred. At the most basic level, the slaves who overheard the conversation may have considered it ridiculous to risk one’s life over a hat and umbrella. The value of the property was not worth the potential harm to the body. More substantially, the comment may have evoked laughter because Aaron was asserting a foolish willingness to stand up to the patrol or exhibiting an overblown sense of honor that exceeded reason, elevating himself socially to the level of the white patrollers. Perhaps the mention of “a duel” elicited the laughter. Duels were clearly the preserve of elite white gentlemen; lower-class southern whites did not even participate in them, so the thought of a slave, so inferior a member of southern society, drawing a pistol in a duel might have struck the “Six or Eight negroes” as humorous. Duels were also always fought among participants who considered themselves social equals. That Aaron’s hypothetical duel would have pitted him on the grounds against a white opponent may have exacerbated the humor of the mental picture the amused slaves were drawing. Whatever the reason, Aaron got the joke, for he, too, “Joined in the laugh.”⁶¹

One pair of South Carolina slaves did attempt to emulate a duel to resolve a dispute, but without much success. In 1817 the slave Paul accused John Adams’s Solomon “of carrying a negro girl to some person in Camden, words took place which brought on an argument,” and they resolved “to have a Civil fight.” Paul “agreed to fight with Solomon,” testimony revealed, “because the latter was always picking at him,” and now Paul would respond like a man. As in a duel, the combatants each had “seconds.” Solomon had three seconds—fellow slaves Kildare, Frank, and Buck—while Paul had seven, including bondmen Eben and Charles. Like any responsible second, Kildare and Frank “advised them to not fight” and “endeavoured to make peace.” The pair also wanted to guarantee that “no injury should be done Solomon” after the fight, for they shared the same master, and as Kildare explained, he feared “his man should blame him if any thing

⁶¹ Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDAH, microfilm reel C2917, case 185; Gorn, “Gouge and Bite,” 41.

happened.” Paul’s friend Eben, however, “went out with Paul to see [that he] had a fair fight.” For insurance, Eben concealed “two bricks in his [own] pockets.” The duel commenced “on the grounds”; however, in the absence of pistols, what resulted was a strange hybrid, a brawl initially shrouded in decorum. Paul knocked Solomon down, but Solomon soon gained the advantage. As Frank parted the opponents, Eben mistakenly believed Frank was joining the fray. Noting that “one was enough to fight another,” Eben fell upon Solomon, and Charles, another of Paul’s seconds, joined in, striking “Solomon on the leg with a stick.” Eben also carried a makeshift sword that Kildare described as “some three edged thing . . . with a cob stuck on the end of it for a handle,” but no one realized it until after the fight. John Martin, a white man present during the entire episode, asked Eben to relinquish the weapon. Eben “replied he could not give it up any how and live,” and instead tossed it on the ground near Charles, who retrieved it and fled the dueling grounds. John Martin played a mysterious role in this confrontation, almost acting as a judge. In the heat of the brawl, Eben threatened to hit Kildare, but “he asked permission of the white people who were there,” who disallowed it. Martin and at least one other white refereed the conflict, perhaps part of the slaves’ effort to add legitimacy to their duel. The duel likely resolved none of the slaves’ differences, as they all appeared in court charged with a “riot.”⁶²

Although slaves’ claims to honor met with mockery in the context of white society, they were nevertheless significant to the bondpeople in the quarters. One loss of honor prompted a touching turn of events on the plantation of Spartanburg District farmer David Golightly Harris. Like any master, Harris surely preferred that his slaves not engage in violent scrapes and suffer harm. As former slave Henry Gladney explained, “My old marster no lak dat way one of his slaves was crippled up” by fighting on the plantation. Injured slaves might require time off work, not labor as quickly or efficiently, or lose monetary value if their wounds proved serious enough. But slaves did enter into violent conflicts. “York and Old Will had a fight,” Harris’s wife recorded, and the elder slave’s defeat at the hands of the younger York humbled him. No longer comfortable remaining on the plantation where York cost him honor among his fellow slaves (and perhaps still menaced him), Old Will asked his mistress for permission to locate a

⁶² Folder 24, Box 1, Kershaw District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, 1800–1861, SCDAH.

new master. As Emily Liles Harris explained of her aged bondman, "York has given him a whipping and he wishes to leave the place." The elderly slave's request suggests the pride that bondpeople maintained in the face of bondage.⁶³

Property, family, reputation—slaves considered each worthy of defending with violence, and the interpersonal battles slaves fought against one another hold implications for the widely used term *slave community*. Historians' emphasis on the slave community succeeded in showing that slaves were not simply objects of white treatment and highlighted bondpeople's ability to combat the degradation of slavery. Often, however, the idea of the slave community rested on a romantic assumption of communal solidarity and cohesion in the quarters.⁶⁴ Like their counterparts across the South, slaves in the upcountry did participate in communal activities and rely on family, religion, and culture to resist oppression and survive bondage, but at the same time they also quarreled and fought, a point most scholars have been reluctant to pursue until recently. To overlook the presence of conflict among slaves offers a misleading portrait of slavery and dehumanizes bondpeople by depriving them of the full range of human emotion. Acknowledging slaves' agency demands accepting the totality of their humanity, replete with their arguments, conflicts, and foibles. Recognizing the violence within the quarters provides a more realistic appraisal of slave life and restores the slaves' humanity.

For slaves in the South Carolina upcountry, violence played an ambiguous role. The conditions under which upcountry slaves lived at times fostered fundamentally antisocial behaviors. Bondpeople's tenuous claims to property, their marital arrangements unsanctioned by law, and their degraded position in southern society prompted individual slaves to respond violently when they perceived that their pre-

⁶³ Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, vol. 2, pt. 2, pp. 129–30 (first quotation); Racine, ed., *Piedmont Farmer*, 354 (second quotation), 357 (third quotation); Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 485–86, 490, 492–93. Two of Spartanburg District master Henry Fergerson's slaves, Sam and Fed, came to blows in 1864 in a dispute over how properly to construct a fence. Sam insisted Fed "had not built it right" and struck him with a fence rail. It was in the best interests of both slaves to build the fence correctly, and in that sense, Sam may have wanted it constructed to the satisfaction of the master so that the bondmen could avoid a whipping. But one could read the incident another way: Sam, without necessarily internalizing the master's values, may have felt a sense of pride in workmanship entirely independent of his desire to please the master and stay his hand. See Spartanburg District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, SCDAH, microfilm reel C2922, case 270.

⁶⁴ Kolchin, "Reevaluating the Antebellum Slave Community," 601; Penningroth, *Claims of Kinfolk*, 88.

rogatives were threatened. Violent episodes among upcountry slaves should not automatically be construed, however, as indicative of deviance, pathology, or social chaos among the enslaved.⁶⁵ Acknowledging violent encounters among upcountry slaves neither denigrates the bondpeople, nor implies any intrinsic weakness of character, nor suggests an inability to resist enslavement. When violent conflicts erupted, they at times exposed the energy and fervor of the slave quarters. Violence played a vital role in slaves' self-regulation; bondpeople enforced their own moral and ethical codes and policed themselves internally, according to their own sets of values and without interference from whites. When slaves fought, their violence revealed their sense of justice, honor, and pride, which in turn connoted their mental resistance to bondage. Moreover, violence was itself an essential component in the creation and severance of relationships among slaves. When Cunningham Darnold witnessed some "pretty violent quarreling" in Laurens District between "Bullocks Dave & Motes negroes," he got an intimate glimpse at Bullock's and Motes's bondmen determining who counted as friends within a particular community and who would be excluded, regarded as strangers. Creating solidarity among one set of slaves necessarily generated conflict with other bondpeople standing outside that communal unit.⁶⁶

An analysis of the violent episodes among slaves in the South Carolina upcountry therefore suggests the need to reconceptualize the slave community. Given the upcountry's relatively small slave population and landholdings, the region offers perhaps an atypical setting in which to investigate questions of individualism and the slave community, but while conditions in the Lowcountry and elsewhere may have been more conducive to the formation of communal values, community dynamics were nevertheless present in the upcountry. And rather than serving necessarily as a corrosive force to that sense of community, violence was in fact compatible with and constitutive of commu-

⁶⁵ I agree with Dylan C. Penningroth that "we need not think of conflict among slaves as a reflection of white oppression or as something inimical to the making and survival of black communities." See Penningroth, "My People, My People," 168–69 (quotation), 175n11.

⁶⁶ Folder 67, Box 1, Laurens District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, 1808–1865, SCDAH. Anthony E. Kaye has recommended supplanting the notion of community with that of neighborhood. Kaye's neighborhood is compatible with the findings presented here because it accommodates conflict as a natural and acceptable part of slaves' negotiating relationships among themselves. "Slaves laid claim to their neighbourhood, in part," Kaye explains, "by mapping its boundaries and drawing distinctions between slaves on the inside and the outside. Carving out the neighbourhood as the grounds of solidarity required slaves to discipline one another, so a measure of antagonism was intrinsic to forging solidarity itself." Kaye, "Neighbourhoods and Solidarity," 3 (quotation), 11, 16, 19.

nity in the South Carolina upcountry. Through violence, slaves enforced their cultural expectations, clarified their hierarchies, delineated differences among themselves, and determined membership in a particular community. Viewed this way, the slave community emerges as a contested arena of negotiation where slaves constructed, maintained, and dissolved social ties. The resulting portrait is not a static slave community, then, but a vibrant collection of multiple slave communities continually in flux and inhabited by real people.